

Officials say proposed freeway options are least disruptive

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The controversial proposed South Mountain Freeway is the most cost-efficient, most feasible and least disruptive of the options, state transportation officials said Thursday.

They said building at ground level along Pecos Road will displace the fewest homes. But they were unable to tell those at the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team Meeting exactly how many homes would be lost in other scenarios. The volunteer group is charged with recommending whether a freeway should be built or not.

The group also did not get specific answers on how the proposed route would affect wildlife and the mountain ridges it would cut through during the presentation by Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) officials and others on the freeway study team.

"They're not studying all the options," advisory team member Chad Blostone of the Foothills HOA board said. "How are they going to remove rock at the ridges?"

The freeway would run along the Pecos Road alignment in Ahwatukee and cut through South Mountain Park, connecting to Interstate 10 at 55th Avenue.

The freeway study team said it prefers to extend the freeway through three mountain ridges, creating canyons in South Mountain Park, rather than building a tunnel underneath or a bridge over them. The deepest vertical cut would be estimated at 220 feet in the ridges, the report showed.

The ADOT freeway study team showed renderings of the proposed route at ground level, if it went on a bridge over the ridges and with it running below them.

They also talked about other route options that

were eliminated, including aligning the freeway with Chandler Boulevard and Ray Road.

Tim Tait, ADOT community relations director, said all the data would be in the draft environmental impact statement when it's released publicly, possibly next year.

The tunnel option was eliminated due to the cost and the fact that it would not eliminate freeway noise, transportation team officials said.

Ben Spargo, a project engineer with HDR Engineering on the freeway study team, said it would cost between about \$1.23 billion and \$1.26 billion to build the freeway below ground compared to about \$810 million to build it at ground level. And building a tunnel under the ridges would still have an impact on the natural setting and would also pose safety concerns, Spargo said.

Tait said tunnels are "natural targets for those who have evil intentions," including terrorists.

Spargo said running the freeway below ground between Interstate 10 near the Loop 202 Freeway in Chandler to about 55th Avenue and Elliot Road would displace between 491 and 616 homes, depending on the type of drainage system used.

Building a bridge over the ridges could cost at least \$200 million more than cutting through them, the report stated.

The Pecos Road alignment was chosen as the

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eastern alignment because building it north of there would create "greater impact to the community" and constructing it south would put it on the Gila River Indian Community land, Tait said. Drainage issues also were taken into account when determining the route, Tait said.

Adelheid Fisher from the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee asked how the freeway team knew that no "documented wildlife" were in the area of the proposed freeway route, something stated in the presentation.

Spargo said the biological experts would discuss that issue at a future meeting.

Advisory team member Michael Goodman said the report showed "no formal trailheads or staging areas for access into the park exist" where the freeway would pass through South Mountain Park but a nationally recognized trail does run through the route. That needs to be included in the study, Goodman said.

"We know there are a number of wildlife corridors," in the proposed route, he said. "Some of this is somewhat misleading."

Regardless of where or how it is built, Ahwatukee resident William Ramsay said, he opposes the freeway.

"Whether it's at grade or sub-grade, it's going to be catastrophic for the community," he said. "No decision's been made officially. Those of us in the community still have a lot to say."

Ahwatukee resident Jim Jochim is also a freeway opponent.

"I don't think it's worth the cost," he said.

Tait said Thursday that a parkway has been studied but would not alleviate traffic as much as a freeway.

South Mountain Freeway is expected to carry as many as 190,000 vehicles per day in 2030 but a parkway would only move 60,000 to 70,000

vehicles a day, he said. A parkway is generally two lanes in each direction and slower speed limits than freeways, Tait said.

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